



Stress and Communication¹

Suzanna Smith and Joe Pergola²

In this publication, we look at why communication is so important to people who are under stress. We also provide some guidelines for using effective listening and conflict resolution skills.

FRIENDS IN NEED

One of the first reactions for many people who are under stress is to seek out help from friends, family, or neighbors. For example, in the case of a medical emergency a neighbor might watch the children until their parents return. Or, a relative might provide money for a short-term loan to make a needed household purchase. A close friend might provide a "listening ear" if there are family problems.

These are all examples of **social support**. Social support includes practical help, such as financial assistance, child care, and transportation, and emotional support, such as listening or helping to sort out problems. Social support has a major impact on an individual's and family's well-being. This support helps people to deal effectively with difficult situations so that stress does not harm physical or emotional health.

Many people who are under stress do not reach out to others because they are concerned about "burdening" friends with problems. Or, they are afraid of appearing "weak" by asking someone else for assistance. They may be frustrated or upset, and find they cannot communicate except in angry outbursts. At the same

time, friends and family members may feel uncomfortable when a friend reaches out, because they may not know how to help.

Those who want to help a friend in need must communicate their interest, acceptance, respect, and willingness to help. Good listening skills open up the channels for friends and family to provide the practical assistance and understanding that is needed.

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION FOR FAMILIES UNDER STRESS

Families that are able to cope effectively with stress tend to solve their problems in positive ways. They talk things through calmly until they reach a solution. They respect each family member's feelings, taking care not to hurt each other and taking time to listen to what each person has to say. They end conflict on a positive note. This style of communication is called **affirming communication**. It is a vital resource for coping with stress and for maintaining family strengths.

The opposite type of communication is discouraging communication. This refers to not talking things through, yelling and screaming, bringing up old problems, and leaving the room or house. Discouraging communication tends to inflame the situation and to make conflicts worse.

1. This document, Fact Sheet HE-2091, was published 11/91, Florida Cooperative Extension Service. For more information, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office.
2. Assistant Professor, Human Development, Home Economics Department; and Multi-County Family Life and Child Development Specialist, Hillsborough County Extension Office, respectively, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap, or national origin. For information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office.

Florida Cooperative Extension Service / Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences / University of Florida / John T. Woeste, Dean

This is not to say that families with good communication skills don't have conflict--they do. However, there are ways to handle conflict effectively that help families preserve their respect and love for each other while solving problems.

LISTENING SKILLS

The core of effective communication is listening. Listening builds the caring relationships that help us withstand life's pressures and strains. With someone caring about us, we feel better about ourselves and have greater confidence to tackle problems head on.

However, in the course of daily conversation, we often spend more time talking than listening. We want to tell others about ourselves rather than to listen to their ideas and concerns. When someone has a problem, we often are quick to offer advice, rather than to listen and to understand. Many of us have underdeveloped listening skills! Listening skills can be learned. Like other skills, communication takes time and practice. Begin by reading and, if possible, trying the communication skills described below.

Nonverbal communication. As much as 60 percent of communication takes place nonverbally, that is, through facial expressions, tone of voice, and body posture. For example, someone who says, "Oh, I had a nice day," but who is looking at the floor, speaking slowly and in a quiet, low tone, and whose mouth is turned down, is communicating something very different than his or her words. Good listening starts with paying attention to what a person is saying with their face, eyes, voice, and body, as well as with their words.

Listen for feelings. Because we sometimes feel uncomfortable with emotions, we may listen to the facts about a situation rather than to how a person feels. For instance, in the example above, a good listener might say, "You look kind of sad," rather than "Oh, you had a good day." This paraphrase helps the person feel understood and invites her or him to say more. Listening for feelings is very important for helping someone under stress, because this is what helps the person to feel understood. Then, if necessary, she or he can go on to make decisions or solve problems.

Ask questions. If a person seems to need to talk, "open" questions are an invitation to say more. For example, you might ask "so, what happened today?" In contrast, "closed" questions require a "yes" or "no" answer or ask for specific information; as a result they tend to cut off conversation or make the speaker feel as

if she or he is being interrogated. Examples of closed questions are: "When did you start feeling bad?" "Have you tried relaxation exercises to help you feel better?" "What do you want for dinner?"

Communicate understanding. Many of us feel we understand a person under stress, but when it comes to communicating understanding we find ourselves tongue-tied. The friend or family member often will not know we have understood unless we communicate that we have understood. Rephrasing or paraphrasing means stating back to the person in your own words what you heard him or her say through nonverbal messages and/or words. A paraphrase might sound something like, "It was a rough day today and you are really tired."

If you want to learn good communication skills, you might start by observing someone whom you think is a good listener. Try to identify what he or she does to help people feel understood. Or, with a friend or family member, practice the skills described above.

Do things to help. Understanding a person's feelings is vitally important to providing the support he or she needs to solve problems and to feel better. However, people also communicate their caring and concern by doing things for others, such as washing the car, cooking a special dinner, or taking a relaxing drive in the country.

Recent research shows that men may be more likely than women to offer practical assistance, such as doing the laundry or repairing the car. Men also seem to be more likely to offer advice, which they see as helping to solve a problem, and less likely to discuss feelings. Women, on the other hand, seem to prefer to talk about their feelings, and they encourage men to do the same. Women then are looking more for a listening ear than for solutions.

At times, these differences may create conflict. Men feel that their efforts to help or show support are not appreciated. Women feel that their need to talk is ignored. It is important to recognize that many men and women do communicate differently. Good communication means trying to understand and to appreciate the many and various ways we can be of help to each other.

STEPS TO EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict is a disagreement that takes place between two or more people. You may not be able to change how the other person thinks or feels, but you can be in charge of your own behavior. Don't wait for the other person to "come around" to your point of view, but do try to open up discussion. Try to work together to talk openly about the situation and to come up with possible solutions that will satisfy both of you.

Be calm. This makes it easier to discuss a problem. You can think more clearly and the other person will feel less threatened.

Define your needs. Decide exactly what is bothering you and what you need to discuss or to change if the situation is to be resolved. Sometimes just talking things through will be enough. At other times you may need to make certain changes to resolve the conflict.

Communicate your needs. Make sure the other person is aware of how you feel. For example, say that you feel embarrassed about something your partner said to friends, or that you were hurt by a remark he or she made about something you did. Simply stating your feelings helps the other person understand your point of view. In contrast, criticizing or blaming the other person usually results in more conflict.

Listen. Make sure you understand and respect the other person's point of view and feelings. Give your full attention and use good listening skills. Be open--don't argue mentally.

Brainstorm. Work together to come up with as many solutions as possible. Say any possible solution that comes to mind, no matter how wild or creative. Don't criticize any idea--that could sidetrack you back to conflict. Keep the atmosphere open and fun.

Evaluate alternatives. When you run out of brainstorming ideas, go over the list of suggestions. Come up with a plan that everyone can accept.

Try out a plan. Once everyone has agreed on a plan, put it to the test. Practice the solution. Keep up your end of the agreement. Be positive and optimistic.

Re-evaluate. A week or two later, after you have tried the solution, come back with the family members involved and discuss how the plan worked. It may be necessary to make some adjustments. Then try again.

Remember, conflict is an inevitable part of human relationships. However, effective conflict resolution can help families to manage stressful situations, to solve problems, and to grow closer.